DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 308 490 CS 009 721

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TITLE Illiteracy in the United States--What and Why?
PUB DATE 24 Aug 88
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Council of Psychologists (46th, Singapore, August 21-25, 1988). For a companion paper, see CS 009 722.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Theories; *Illiteracy; *Literacy; Psychologists
IDENTIFIERS *United States

ABSTRACT

Some of the many topics which challenge psychologists working in the literacy field are: (1) the priority that should be attached to illiteracy in relationship to other national and personal problems; (2) varying definitions of "literacy" and "illiteracy" that inhibit communication and generalization; (3) the lack of valid and reliable scales for assessing persons at lower literacy levels and diagnosing needs for remediation; (4) the need for interdisciplinary and multivariate research on illiteracy; (5) distinguishing between illiteracy as a cause and illiteracy as a correlate, and trying to determine the underlying factors that account for correlations; (6) the levels of literacy required for various roles in society; and (7) competition between external and internal demands for literacy. (SR)

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46th Annual Convention, International Council of Psychologists
Singapore, 24 August 1988

ILLITERACY IN THE UNITED STATES - WHAT AND WHY?

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Illiteracy is a "headline" item in the United States, where the "United States Department of Education estimates that about 23 million adults ... are functionally illiterate, unable to use printed information to function effectively in society" (New York Times, 1988).

Illiteracy in Relationship to Other National and Personal Problems

That old story about two clinical psychologists who met on the street comes to mind. After the usual greetings, the first one asked, "How is your wife?" The second one responded, "Compared to what?"

We can change the characters in the story to two research psychologists. The first one asks, "What do you tnink about illiteracy?" The second one responds, "Compared to what?"

Compared to other pressing social problems like drugs, AIDS, homelessness, child abuse, care for the elderly?

Compared to economic and environmental problems like budget deficits, inflation, acid rain, ozone layers?

Compared to individual problems like alcoholism, physical disability,

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psychoses, divorce?

Compared to literacy?

Only the last comparison seems easy. Illiteracy must be worse than literacy, by whatever definitions we adopt. However, researchers interested in the field must first come to grips with those definitions. Indeed, review of the burgeoning literature on literacy suggests that some social scientists are specializing in the definitions rather than in research that might advance our knowledge and insights into the causes and cures of illiteracy - or the social, personal, economic, and political values attached to literacy.

Definitions of "Literacy" and "Illiteracy"

At the most superficial level, there is what Solomon calls "literacy in the snobbish sense" (meaning "well read") and "functional literacy" (being able to write a letter of application or read a warning label or advertisement). He notes that the former

> is the sort of literacy that is paraded across the pages of The New York Review of Books, ... involves having read not only Moby Dick but also Typee, having Nietzsche and Eliot quotes at the tip of one's tongue, and being able to recite lines of Chaucer or Shakespeare without pausing even a moment in one's conversation. Such literacy [he continues] is unabashedly elitist ... and a mark of social superiority, which is not [he adds] an argument against it. (1986, p.41)

We are glad that we do not have to defend this kind of literacy here. ICP members are obviously well endowed with it!

What we are talking about is the other kind, "functional literacy."

The most popular definition in the States, one that seems to have come into use in World War II, is reading at or above the fifth-grade level, where "fifth-grade level" is determined by a score on a standardized reading comprehension test. The apparent precision of this definition is contradicted by what we know about standardized reading comprehension tests. A grade equivalent score of 5.0 on one test may have quite a different meaning from a grade equivalent score of 5.0 on another quite respectable test. More serious, neither tells us what the person can actually do or what kind of help he or she needs to become more "literate" - or less "illiterate."

(Incidentally, in the United States, the term "illiterate" is not applied to young children or to people for whom English is a second language, although the notion of "literacy training" was once tied almost exclusively to the waves of immigrants coming to America at the turn of the century. And such training bore the heavy burden of transmitting a national ideology and culture, as well as basic skills in the new language.)

Other countries and groups have different kinds of definitions. For example, the Canadian Association of Adult Education associates "literacy" with the completion of nine years of formal schooling. The UNESCO definition is peculiarly circular:

> A person is literate when he has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required... (Cairns, 1977, p. 44).

In a recent review, Langer (1988, pp. 42-43) points out that "literacy

is used interchangeably to denote a skill, a state, and an action, each use stemming from a different set of research questions and a different tradition in research and instruction." Her **state** corresponds more or less to Solomon's "snobbish literacy," and is associated primarily with disciplines such as literary criticism and philosophy. Psychologists, she says, in their focus on individual differences and separable behaviors, helped to create the "view of literacy as **skill** that gave birth to the field of reading." Sociology and anthropology, on the other hand, tend to treat literacy as "functional **activities** in society."

None of these views is wrong, of course, but the field suffers from confusions in terminology and the relative isolation from one another of researchers with different views. Treating literacy primarily as a skill, virtually ignoring the context in which it develops or the values society places on it, is not productive even with young school children who, as we have said before, are not candidates for the label "illiterate" even though their reading and writing abilities may be meager. It is certainly a poor way to approach an understanding of adult illiteracy. Similarly, treating literacy primarily in terms of societal needs without comparable consideration of individuals' motivations and the ways that skills develop will lead to situations where neither society nor the cause of literacy is served.

Within the skills dimension, there are differences of opinion about what constitutes literacy. Is literacy simply the ability to decode certain symbols using the correct oral response? There is ample evidence that this

does not necessarily imply comprehension. Is the failure to read, then, merely the lack of decoding skills or is it the inability to understand the concepts and relationships the symbols stand for? Given the necessary decoding skills, should a person be able to read and comprehend anything he can understand by listening? Are there limits to the abilities of some individuals to comprehend that preclude their literacy rising above a modest level?

These concerns about reading-decoding apply equally to writing-coding. A person may be able to write words dictated to him or her but unable to compose a simple answer to a question requiring some reasoning.

There are programs that advocate teaching writing as a way of learning to read and others that emphasize reading as necessary before writing, as well as those that combine or integrate the two.

Illiteracy as Cause, Effect, and Correlate

Explanations and hypotheses about why we have so many illiterates in the United States are as varied as the definitions. Teaching methods, social and demographic variables, and the "illiterates" themselves all get blamed at one time or another. The villain is probably "all of the above," but we need the kinds of multidisciplinary, multivariate investigations suggested earlier to try to tease out the relative contributions of educational, individual, and environmental factors.

In spite of the caution drilled into our heads when we were graduate students, "Correlation is not necessarily causation," we tend to look at the

estimates of the number of illiterates in unemployment lines, on welfare, in menial jobs, or in jails and conclude that illiteracy is what put them there. "If they were only taught to read and write," we say, "it would be grand!" We'd reduce crime and the federal deficit (a proposition that would be enthusiastically received by both of our major parties in this election year). This view is certainly simplistic and probably wrong - at least in most cases. It is much more likely that some subtle - or maybe not so subtle - combination of social and environmental characteristics is responsible both for their lack of success in reading and writing and for the fact that they're in jail (or wherever).

Literacy Requirements

Finally, for this paper, let us raise two hard, but researchable questions: How literate do people need to be? And who says so? In the United States as in most democracies, one of the main arguments for literacy is that people have to be able to read to vote intelligently. But few of our average citizens vote on the basis of what they read, not enough to swing the state of Utah; they vote because they've always voted for a particular party or they liked the way a candidate looked on television or they were told to vote that way. Most people don't read very much - period - beyond newspapers and the reading they are "required" to do in school or at work. According to Solomon (1986, p. 38), "Even a best-selling (whether or not "good" book) [in the United States] might reach 5% of the population." A book written for the same kind of audience as the Atlantic Monthly would be "exceedingly successful if it sold 100,000 copies (.05%)." The literacy demands of many

jobs have been reduced rather than increased (perhaps, we must admit, because there were not enough "literate" people to fill them), and even in a high tech society there are some jobs, which have to be done, that would bore very literate people to death.

External vs. Internal Demands for Literacy

Ever since the invention of the printing press, literacy has been promoted for various noble and nefarious purposes: to bolster the rise of Protestantism, to spread Marxism and other political ideologies, to acculturize "outsiders," to add voters to the rolls (or to provide "standards" for keeping them off), to supply industry with workers and armies with soldiers, to create jobs for educators, to provide a market for products. Such external demands for literacy must be balanced with internal demands. In a study that my colleague will describe in a moment, a prisoner in a literacy training program was asked whether he was going to try to finish high school or take a high school equivalency test. "No," he answered, "I just want a sixth-grade education." We must not forget that literacy is as much an individual as it is a societal issue.

Challenges for Psychologists Working in the Literacy Field

In this short paper we have been able to touch on only some of the topics that challenge psychologists working in the literacy field:

1. The priority that should be attached to illiteracy in relationship to other national and personal problems

2. Varying definitions of "literacy" and "illiteracy" that inhibit communication and generalization

3. The lack of valid and reliable scales for assessing persons at lower literacy levels and diagnosing needs for remediation

4. The need for interdisciplinary and multivariate research on illiteracy

5. Distinguishing between illiteracy as a cause and illiteracy as a correlate, and trying to determine the underlying factors that account for correlations

6. The levels of literacy required for various roles in society

7. Competition between external and internal demands for literacy

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